

## Agenda for Children: 2003 Year in Review

12/12/03

### **The mission of Agenda for Children is to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive.**

This takes **strong partnerships**, capable of creating a collective base of experience, leadership, and wisdom. It takes **informed voices** willing to speak out together on behalf of support for children and families. It takes a strong and stable organizational infrastructure with the **capacity to sustain a mission-driven agenda**.

#### 2003 Activities and accomplishments

Knowing that supports for children and families require action at the local, state, and national level, Agenda for Children works closely with key partners in each of these arenas.

Close to home, Agenda for Children has dozens of partners, friends, and constituents who keep us real, inform our actions and decisions, and provide their own brand of leadership and expertise in the broad community of advocates for Louisiana's children. Our relationship with the **leaders and residents of the B.W. Cooper Housing Development** is a coming together of advocates and the voices of the people – everyday people working to achieve self-determination for themselves, their children, and their communities. Agenda for Children strives to learn from, and be accountable to, the community and to help bring the community voices into the arenas where policies are made that directly affect their lives.

The **Pyramid Parent Training** program, led by Ursula and D.J. Markey, provides leadership throughout the area and the nation with, and on behalf of, families who have children with special needs. Pyramid offers a series of workshops called "Positive Behavioral Support" for families with children who have challenging behaviors; counsels, represents, and stands with families of children whose rights have been ignored by the school systems; and represents our region in the nationwide federally mandated network of "Community Parent Resource Centers."

The **Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL)** sets the standard for excellence in the field of juvenile justice reform. Thanks to JJPL, Louisiana's children and young people in the custody of the juvenile justice system have a chance to escape from abuse and mistreatment and re-direct their lives. We have worked hand in hand with JJPL this year to close at least one juvenile prison and move the funds into community-based alternatives to incarceration. Thanks to the skills, knowledge, and leadership of JJPL, substantial progress has been made and success is within our grasp.

Launched in November 1998, the local **Children's Services Collaborative** was created by the city's Alliance for Human Services established under Mayor Dutch Morial's administration. Agenda for Children is the managing entity and co-chairs the

Collaborative with Children's Bureau. The purpose is to make New Orleans a city in which services and systems work effectively to support children and families. The work of CSC has been carried out through working groups, committees, and caucuses focused on child and family issues and related service delivery systems.

The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** has been working in 22 communities across the nation toward "improving the life chances of vulnerable children by helping to strengthen their families and neighborhoods." New Orleans' Central City is one of these communities. Our work with "**Making Connections**" as fiscal agent and core team member has expanded our **capacity to hear the voices of families and to facilitate opportunities for grassroots leadership to emerge and create change**. Following an initial three years of planning, listening, and building community, Making Connections-New Orleans (MC-NO) identified three areas of activity to pursue in Central City over the next three years. These include **housing, workforce literacy, and family financial strength**.

In the arena of housing, working hand in hand with the New Orleans Neighborhood Development Collaborative (NONDC) Making Connections-New Orleans has:

- identified potential home-buyers for the nine properties currently held by NONDC and connected them with homebuyer education and preparation programs
- begun construction on one new home, that will also serve the purpose of visually demonstrating the effects of renovation and make home ownership more inviting for Central City residents.
- formalized an agreement for soft second funds that can reduce each mortgage loan amount by \$20,000
- begun work to increase the availability of foreclosure prevention programs

The MC-NO Central City Literacy Alliance, established this year as a subset of the Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans, began its work by bringing together the 17 providers of adult education in Central City. Results so far include:

- an inventory of course offerings and gaps in coverage
- a partnership with Goodwill Industries to develop a literacy curriculum specific to culinary arts training
- the development of a "family center" and adult education site at Woodson School

The MC-NO Central City Asset Building Coalition (CCABC) focuses on building family financial strength. Their activities this year have included:

- establishing new Volunteer Income Tax Preparation (VITA) sites
- conducting an Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) campaign – and connecting tax filers to the VITA sites – that resulted in over one million dollars in tax refunds to Central City residents who participated
- the launch of the "Prosperity Club" in which residents are learning financial literacy, including how to qualify for first-time homebuyer programs.

The **Mid South Family Alliance** (MSFA) is an arm of the Foundation for the Mid South (FMS), which operates in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas. With support from FMS and the MSFA, Agenda for Children substantially expanded our statewide constituency

for **improving the quality, availability, and affordability of child care and early education in Louisiana.**

The reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant and TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), commonly known as welfare, brought us into new partnerships with the **National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)**, based at New York City's Columbia University, as well as with an old friend, the Children's Defense Fund. Agenda for Children is also pleased to be a part of an emerging NCCP family-strengthening agenda known as **LIFT**, "Let's Invest in Families Today", and with the South Carolina-based **Southern Institute on Children and Families** in a strategic agenda for improving the quality and affordability of child care and early education throughout the South.

**Voices for America's Children (formerly known as the National Association of Child Advocates)**, of which we are a member, spent much of the year 2002 designing protocols for effective child advocacy organizations. In 2003, the protocols and procedures were successfully piloted in three sites in various areas of the nation, reviewed, and adopted. We participated on the design team for this project, known as "Essential Elements", and look forward to using this as a tool for strengthening our work.

Our newest partner, the Washington DC-based **National Women's Law Center (NWLC)** came to us in September with a proposal to fix the glitch in Louisiana's new refundable state child care tax credit and to get the word out that this refundable credit is now available in significant dollar amounts for 2003 tax filers who qualify. Agenda for Children is now working along with six other states and the District of Columbia to promote broader awareness of, and utilization of, the tax credits available to low and moderate income working families.

Thanks to a **three-year core funding grant from the Institute of Mental Hygiene**, we were able to hire a full-time operations manager/grants manager in January, 2003 to improve the efficiency of our internal systems. At the same time, we were also challenged by the necessity of having to move our New Orleans staff of 20 persons to a new office.

On February 14<sup>th</sup> **we moved** to 1720 St. Charles Avenue – another big old house, only bigger and older. We rented this house, which had been vacant for two years, with the understanding that we would be responsible for all interior face-lifting work, and that included crumbling walls, old peeling wallpaper, and more. If it hadn't been for Mike Marsiglia, who donated his time and a crew of "face-lifters" for five weeks, we'd be on the street. Thanks, Mike!

The **Agenda for Children Board** held a planning retreat in May, with Linetta Gilbert facilitating. Top priorities that were identified for action included:

- developing and expanding an active informed constituency that "moves when you prick 'em!"

- hiring, or otherwise engaging, a budget analyst to increase our organizational capacity to analyze and influence priorities in the State budget
- streamlining our internal financial management processes

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## **Our mission means that the basic needs of children and families must be met.**

This includes nutritious food and decent safe housing, health care, and adequate family income.

### **2003 Activities and accomplishments**

2003 brought us into the network of 35 states developing and using the “**Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard**” (FESS) created by the Washington DC-based Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) and the University of Washington (state). Released on September 16<sup>th</sup> at a news conference at the Ashe Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans, the Standard introduces a new measure of income adequacy that gives detailed information about what it costs to live, in each parish of Louisiana for families in different circumstances. By measuring what it costs for families to meet their basic needs without assistance, the self-sufficiency standard responds to the need for accurate information about what it really costs a family to live in different parts of the country and the state. Whereas the federal poverty level measure is the same for a two-parent family with school-age children in Boston as it is for a single-parent family with infant twins in Thibodaux, the self-sufficiency standard carefully differentiates by household composition and place. The result is a **localized measure that has practical applications** for government, service providers, advocates, and vulnerable families.

The Self-Sufficiency tables for Louisiana show that a single mother in Orleans Parish with one infant and one pre-schooler needs an income of at least \$27,660 annually to meet her most basic expenses. In East Baton Rouge Parish she would need \$26,916; in Caddo Parish, \$26,220; and in Lafourche, \$24,927.

If she works full-time at minimum wage, \$5.15 per hour, this single mother earns a mere \$10,712 annually. Subtracting payroll taxes and adding tax credits, her net yearly income is \$14,097, obviously falling far short of the earnings necessary for her family to be economically self-sufficient.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard tells us that families have a hard time meeting basic expenses not because they lack responsibility, work ethic, or budgeting skills, but because they lack money.

The release of the Louisiana Self-Sufficiency Standard was received enthusiastically by our partners and constituents and the media. The Times Picayune wrote an editorial

about the Standard on September 19<sup>th</sup>, ending with these words: “Though the advocacy groups’ definition of poverty isn’t the one endorsed by the government, it’s much more practical and realistic than the current federal formula. Those trying to help the poor in the state ought to put its conclusions to good use.”

The challenge now is to imbed the Standard in state and federal policy. The federal poverty line, now used to calculate eligibility for government assistance for families and communities, is woefully inadequate in its calculation and its effect. Set at \$15,260 per year for a family of three – regardless of the age of the family members or where in the nation they live – the poverty line has not been adjusted to reflect the rising cost of living since 1997.

We’re spreading the word about the Standard through the web and other communication channels, and sharing the information with our Congressional delegation and state legislators.

In the context of basic needs, family income quite obviously plays a major role in a family’s capacity to provide for their children. Supports and services for families without adequate incomes can help fill the gap. The **1996 Congressional TANF legislation radically transformed the way welfare works** to support low-income and no-income families across this nation. TANF brought with it new rules and new penalties, strict work requirements, time limits, and quotas. The welfare rolls dropped dramatically all across the nation. In Louisiana, the numbers declined from 48,000 in 1999 to 20,000 in 2003. Twenty percent (20%) of Louisiana families who were receiving cash assistance (welfare) left for reasons of “sufficient income”, either earned or through other sources such as child support or Social Security. Five percent (5%) left voluntarily and 20% were dropped for procedural reasons, which included not providing income verification or failing to show up for an appointment. Fifty-five percent (55%) lost their benefits because they reached the time limits or were sanctioned for not following one or more of the rules.

**The TANF legislation was up for reauthorization in the Congress last year (in 2002), as was the Child Care and Development Block Grant.** Child and family advocates across the nation rallied to speak up for needed improvements, such as incentives to states for moving people into employment (not just off the rolls) and reducing poverty. Unfortunately we wound up in a defensive posture as the agenda became focused on increasing the number of hours that welfare recipients would be required to work in order to receive assistance. Currently at 30 hours per week, the bill that passed the U.S. House of Representatives included an increase to 40 hours, as well as an increase in the percent of the caseload required to be in compliance with the work requirements in order for the state to receive its full allocation.

As the time to adjourn drew near, the debate wound up in a standoff and the **Congress avoided reauthorization** by passing a continuing resolution to allow states to continue TANF and the Child Care Development Fund into 2003.

Working with several national partners, **Agenda for Children** actively represented the interests of Louisiana's low-income children and families by:

- developing relationships with Congressional staffers
- conducting advocacy training and briefings throughout the state
- producing and placing op-eds and radio spots
- developing and engaging a statewide constituency contact list of nearly 1,000 people
- generating 2000 postcards, over 200 emails, 200 letters, and a sign-on letter with 78 signatures – all urging progressive action on TANF and child care

This scenario repeated itself in 2003. As Congress prepares to recess, TANF is once again continued rather than re-authorized. However, child care funding – in the amount of five or six billion dollars appears to be the highest priority for amendments being discussed for action on the Senate Floor when the bill comes up in 2004.

**Improving access and connections to health care for children** continues to be a major part of our work. The Children's Health Insurance Program, known in Louisiana as **LaCHIP**, offers Medicaid coverage for children in low and moderate income families earning up to 200% of poverty level, or \$34,308/year for a family of four.

In September, 2002, Agenda for Children was awarded a four-year \$1million Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant to become the **lead agency statewide** for the next phase of Covering Kids, now known as **Covering Kids and Families (CKF)**. We have established regional coalitions to conduct outreach in the localities, led by the Children's Coalition of Northeast Louisiana based in Monroe, CHRISTUS St. Francis Cabrini based in Alexandria, and the Children's Services Collaborative in the New Orleans area. By this time next year, the network of CKF regional coalitions will be fully expanded to cover the whole state.

This year the Louisiana Children's health Insurance Program (LaCHIP) marked its five-year anniversary. Medicaid, Louisiana CKF, and partners around the state celebrated outstanding success at enrolling eligible children. When LaCHIP was implemented in 1998, Louisiana ranked as a state with one of the highest percentages of uninsured children, 21.9%. As reported in the Times Picayune on 12/11/03, a recent survey shows that the number of uninsured children in our state has been cut in half, to about 11%. Outreach and enrollment efforts have been so successful that about half of the state's children are now covered by Medicaid/LaCHIP.

The past year has been a period of transition and collaboration for CKF. We have expanded the original two city-based coalitions into strong active regional coalitions. The CKF Northeast Louisiana Coalition held a back-to-school Health Fair that drew over 4,000 people. The Central Louisiana Coalition partnered with Juvenile Court judges to ensure that families with eligible uninsured children coming through the courts get connected to LaCHIP. The Southeast Coalition brought faith-based leaders together to engage the media in the effort and to share their own commitment to spreading the word about LaCHIP with their colleagues throughout the region.

Our statewide coalition has been active as well – engaging and supporting a statewide network, creating and managing the listserv, developing new strategies to reach the children who remain without health insurance, and sharing information with our partners and constituencies through a quarterly newsletter.

The recent study mentioned previously indicates that many families are still unaware of LaCHIP. Our efforts to reach families with uninsured eligible children have included partnering with Louisiana Public Broadcasting to run announcements across the state and producing our highly successful third annual Back-to-School campaign with a press conference at Children's Hospital in New Orleans and an outreach partnership with a national grocery chain, Albertson's.

Reaching pregnant women is also a top priority. In January, Medicaid implemented the LaMOMS program, providing coverage for pregnant women up to 185% of federal poverty level. CKF hosted a press conference in Baton Rouge to help spread the word about this newly available coverage.

We also continue to reach out to special populations. This year we received a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to enhance efforts to reach Vietnamese families, and the Medicaid office is now in the process of finalizing a Vietnamese LaCHIP application.

The CKF agenda includes drawing attention to the plight of uninsured parents. There are an estimated 561,000 Louisiana adults who lack health insurance. About 402,000 of those are estimated to have annual incomes less than 200% of the federal poverty level. Last spring CKF collaborated with the LA Public Health Institute and others to host a series of events in conjunction with the national "Cover the Uninsured" campaign, including a town hall meeting with video participation from U.S. Senator John Breaux, presentations by Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary David Hood and a representative from BlueCross/BlueShield, plus personal stories from families.

In the Spring of 2002, we developed the **Louisiana Children's Oral Health Initiative**, with a small grant from the DSS Office of Head Start Collaboration. Having determined that oral health was a major problem for Head Start children, DSS invited Agenda for Children to look **at improving oral health practices and overcoming barriers to dental care for all of Louisiana's young children.**

We began by conducting two **focus groups** of parents to hear what they had to say about oral health practices and accessing dental care, and we learned a lot. Most parents were knowledgeable about how to take care of their children's teeth, although there was some variance in actual practices and a lot of confusion about when children should have their first visit to the dentist. The expense of dental care was the major reason given for not making regular dental appointments. "Even if you have insurance," said one parent, "it doesn't cover the whole cost." Some parents said they made dental appointments for their children and didn't keep them, a major complaint from dentists themselves. The

main reasons given for this included transportation problems and a concern about the quality of care available to them.

In 2003 the Oral Health Initiative released a **policy brief**, “Brushing Up on Children’s Oral Health in Louisiana”. The brief, which can be accessed through our website, outlines recommendations for preventive care, access to providers of dental care, and community education.

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## **Our mission means that children must be nurtured and well taught, beginning in the early years and continuing through adolescence.**

With respect to young children, we operate on the assumption that parents need to know what constitutes quality child care and education, institutions need to know how to provide it, public policies must ensure it, and funds must be available to support it. Education in the public schools is an issue being addressed by the CSC Education Work Group and Pyramid Parent Training, with the guidance and direction of parents. TANF funds have been used to create a “universal preschool” program, known as LA 4, that has demonstrated substantial impact on preparing children to succeed in school.

### **2003 Activities and accomplishments**

Founded in 1989, **Child Care Resources (CCR)**, operating out of our New Orleans and Thibodaux offices, provides **information for parents and training for child care personnel**. For parents, the child care resource and referral (R&R) component maintains a database of over 2,400 child care, after-school care, and early education programs and facilities in the 14 parishes of Southeast Louisiana. During the Fiscal Year (FY) 2003, 5,690 families called CCR and received help with their child care needs. Twenty-one percent (21%) needed referrals to child care and the rest wanted related information, consultation, or assistance. CCR provides each family that is looking for child care with detailed information on facilities that meet their particular needs and our “quality child care checklist” to help them make the best possible choice.

Child Care Resources also offers an array of training and technical assistance opportunities for child care centers and family child care providers. In FY 2003 there were 6,838 calls to CCR from child care personnel and providers, seeking information or assistance or registering for a training session.

The **CCR Map to Inclusive Child Care** Training Program (known as the Inclusion program), operates statewide out of Agenda for Children’s Thibodaux office, offering in-depth training for child care providers who include or would like to include children with disabilities in their programs. In FY03 we offered 44 Inclusion training sessions for 1,304 participants. In the first three months of FY04, July through September, 20 sessions were offered, for a total of 572 participants. Over the past 15 months, the



Inclusion contract has also provided 73 sessions in CPR and Pediatric First Aid for 1,109 participants in the 14 parishes of Southeast Louisiana

**Positive Steps (PS)**, our “core” training initiative operating out of the New Orleans and Thibodaux offices offered 285 workshops – typically three hours long – for 6,431 participating child care teachers in fourteen parishes over the twelve-month period ending 9/30/03. Topics cover the whole range of child development and early education, from “Brain Development” to “Messy Play” and the curriculum is continually expanded, this year offering 20 new topics, including children’s mental health. The demand for training among child care personnel significantly exceeds the supply. PS began the year by offering three sessions (in three different locations) each Saturday. Now we typically do four sessions each Saturday and two on weekdays after working hours.

“**Right from Birth**”, a free-standing six-session curriculum used in several of our programs, offers parents and other caregivers of children from birth through 18 months practical applications of the research on brain development and developmentally appropriate care and guidance. The six-session interactive curriculum is rooted in simple and practical advice and supplemented by videos.

One of our favorite projects is the **Barbara Lemann Fund**, created in 2000 by a gift in Barbara’s memory and continued through a grant from the Institute of Mental Hygiene (IMH). The Barbara Lemann Fund awards mini-grants to teachers and caregivers of young children in centers, family child care homes, preschool classrooms, and summer programs. In the past year, with continuing support from IMH, **13 child care and early education programs received mini-grants**, typically in the amount of \$500, to enhance their programs through the purchase of materials such as books or blocks, expand parent involvement, and conduct special activities. Eight of these programs also asked for, and received, technical assistance from Agenda for children to enhance the effectiveness of the mini-grant.

**BookPartners, a project of the Children’s Services Collaborative’s Child Care Working Group**, is a “companion piece” to the Barbara Lemann Fund in its efforts to provide important resources for early childhood education. In partnership with the National Council of Jewish Women Greater New Orleans Section, BookPartners provides new, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant books to child care centers, family child care homes, and other programs for young children. Contributions are invited from businesses, individuals, and community organizations to purchase books and quantity discounts are offered by several book stores and distributors.

Our newest training series is especially for parents. Known as “**FREE**” – **Family Resources for Early Education** – this new initiative provides CCR the opportunity to engage parents in an appropriately designed format and curriculum for best practices in the care of young children. FREE is available by request from agencies or organizations serving low-income parents of young children, and it IS free. In the first nine months of the program, 68 sessions have been conducted for 738 participants. We have worked with parents at homeless shelters, including Liberty House and Infinity; B.W. Cooper

Housing Development, Carver High School, Job Corps and Job Challenge, Kingsley House, and area Head Start programs.

We love hearing from parents about the difference FREE has made in their lives. Several sessions into an early literacy series for parents at a homeless shelter, one mother told the trainer that she did not know how to read herself, but the training had inspired her to enroll in adult training classes. By the end of the series she was able to read a story to her child. Another mother was worried about her four-year-old's tendency to talk to himself. The trainer put her fears to rest, letting her know that this is perfectly normal behavior at age four. She was greatly relieved. "I want him to have a normal life and get a good job, not a crazy (disability) check," was how she expressed it.

Our new "**Family Child Care Visiting Program**" (FCCVP) was created at the request of, and with funding from, the Department of Social Services (DSS). FCCVP visits family child care providers – persons using their own homes to care for fewer than seven children – helping them to assess the quality of their program, and providing technical assistance on ways to best meet the developmental needs of the children in their daily care. Since child care licensing in Louisiana is only required for facilities caring for seven or more children, family child care falls outside of the system set up for regulating and monitoring child care. They are, however, an essential part of the child care system and they are also eligible to receive Child Care Assistance payments from the state's Department of Social Services (DSS). A concern about there being no outside "eyes" focused on home-based programs was what led DSS to offer this contract.

In the first ten months of the program, FCCVP has done 730 visits to 506 family child care homes. Two hundred and twenty-four (224) of the homes received a follow-up visit to help assess and guide their progress on the suggestions offered at the first visit. In addition to the assessment and advice, providers also receive materials to enhance the safety and quality of the care being offered. Children's books, educational videos, outlet covers, folders and forms to keep appropriate records, and toys are given, as well as referrals to resources that can help them – such as the child care food subsidy program and our Barbara Lemann Fund.

The response from the providers visited has been enthusiastic. One provider told us that she felt "more important" after our visit and that the job she was doing felt more meaningful to her. We left her in a better mood than when we first arrived! Our program staff and consultants report that most of the providers have complied with the suggestions offered on the first visit when we go back a second time. At the initial phone contact, some providers are skeptical, but many are eager to have us visit.

In April we added a new feature to our efforts to reach family child care providers and enhance the quality of care. Based on what we were learning from the visits, as well as from the parents and providers calling the resource and referral line, we designed a **family child care provider orientation**. People who call in expressing an interest in starting a family child care program are invited, as well as some existing providers. The purpose of the orientation is to get new providers started off right, to correct some of the

misguided practices – like sitting children in front of a television all day – that often result purely from a lack of information, and to create some bonding among providers interested in quality care.

We have conducted 9 orientations with participation ranging from 12 to 22 participants who give rave reviews! Providers indicate that they would like to extend the training session beyond three hours. They express that they feel more knowledgeable about family child care as a professional early child care setting and they have put what they learned into practice. At our follow-up visits we see parent corners showing daily schedules, learning areas set up appropriately, and wall displays at children's eye level. Even when we suggest changes, the providers are receptive and cooperative and even enthusiastic. Reaching providers at the onset of their venture into the business, and at their teachable moments, appears to make a big difference

In 2003, Agenda for Children has partnered with the state and other contractors in a statewide campaign – using focus groups, printed materials, radio spots, and promotional materials – to raise **public awareness** about the importance and ingredients of quality child care, as well as the availability of Child Care Assistance (subsidies) for low and moderate income families. Our involvement in the national Better Baby Care campaign, which focuses on improving policies and practices for infants and toddlers, ties closely to the overall statewide effort. With a small pass-through grant from the Packard Foundation through Voices for America's Children, we conducted 143 community presentations for 6,400 individuals; mailed bi-monthly printed materials to a list of over 1,500 organizations and individuals; and conducted advocacy trainings in 3 areas of the state.

We have long felt that the major missing piece in our efforts to create a child care and early education system that effectively supports family life and the healthy development of young children is an elevated public awareness of what it means. If parents and the public really understand and demand what young children need – wherever they are – to grow strong and healthy and ready to succeed in school, the policy framework and the service delivery system will rise to meet these expectations.

However, we also know that the **providers of child care have to be given the means to rise!** We are happy to report that **new efforts in this direction** are also in place through DSS. These include an increase in financial incentives for centers that meet national accreditation standards and family child care providers monitored by the State Department of Education's Child Care Food Program. Small grants for repairs and equipment are also available, as funds permit, and a career ladder has been created to encourage and support child care personnel in their efforts to seek training and higher education that will increase and expand their skills in the profession.

Additionally, Agenda for Children received a grant from DSS to pilot a program we proposed to offer short-term Child Care Assistance for parents who need child care while they look for a job or explore education and training opportunities. Known as **Pre-CCA** (Child Care Assistance), the program offers up to four consecutive weeks of child care

subsidy payments, or a total of six weeks in a year, for parents who would be eligible for Child Care Assistance from the state IF they had jobs or were enrolled in school. Since the inception of this program in December, 2002, we have paid for short-term child care for 267 families. Fifty percent (50%) of the parents have successfully gained employment and/or enrolled in school or training.

There is still much to be done. The payment rate for centers receiving Child Care Assistance is \$75 per child per week – too low for the expenses of a quality program – and family child care providers receive less than that. Part of the \$75 is in the form of a parent co-payment, which is often uncollected, making the scenario even dimmer. Up until April of this year, parent co-payments were reasonable and families at the lowest end of the sliding income scale had their child care fully subsidized. Then on April 1<sup>st</sup>, DSS abruptly announced a new co-payment schedule, due to a shortfall in funds, requiring substantially bigger co-payments. The parents in the lowest income bracket now have to pay \$22.50 per child per week, and most of them can't do it.

It could be worse. The state budget that emerged from the Administration would have cut \$5 million in state general funds from the allocation for Child Care Assistance. This would have resulted in an additional loss of 16 million federal dollars. Working with child care advocates around the state, we convinced state legislators to restore the monies that were cut, but were unsuccessful in our efforts to obtain an additional \$5 million, which would have enabled our state to draw down the balance of the federal child care monies available to us.

When Congress re-convenes in January, we will all need to get back to work on expanding funding in the Child Care and Development Block Grant by an increase of at least **\$6 billion** over five years to reach more eligible children and help our state advance quality care. Our own state legislature has work to do in this area also, that being to appropriate the match of \$5 million additional funds needed to draw down the remainder of our currently available federal share.

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## **Our mission means that children must be protected from harm.**

### **2003 Activities and accomplishments**

Children in Louisiana's juvenile prisons are abused daily or subject to being abused daily, with no recourse, even no right or opportunity to call for help. Unlike children and youth abused by their parents, they have no right to call a hot line. Unlike children abused by a teacher or other helping professional, their parents cannot call law enforcement and expect a response. Unlike children and youth who are abducted, their escape is not celebrated. If they escape their abusers, they are further punished.

In our state's juvenile detention facilities, **young people sustain an average of 500 injuries per month caused by violence. Roughly 100 – or 20% – of those injuries are inflicted by an adult directly responsible for that child's care and rehabilitation.** The remaining injuries, inflicted by one young person on another, appear often to be the result of a prison guard's coercion. **This is child abuse, committed under the auspices of, and with substantial funding from, the State of Louisiana.** It can no longer be tolerated.

**Nor can we tolerate the injustice that permeates the juvenile justice system itself.** Consider these facts:

- Dispositions vary widely by parish despite similarities in prior offense histories.
- African American youth are incarcerated for much longer periods of time despite little difference in the severity of offense or prior offense history.

Time served by a youth correlates only slightly to the severity of his or her offense. Low level offenses, such as status offenses, tend to result in dispositions as long as those for serious offenses.

But the flaws in our state's over-reliance on incarceration as a response to juvenile offenses do not stop at personal cruelty and institutional injustice. **Except perhaps for the relatively small proportion of youth who pose a serious threat to the public safety, incarceration just doesn't make sense.**

**#1: It doesn't work. Decades of research show this over and over again.** But you don't have to read the research. Just think about it. If you lock up angry kids and beat them periodically; if you insult them and deprive them; if you impose unreasonable demands on them – like finishing your lunch in 5 minutes; their anger grows and they get worse. If you ignore mental disorders, learning disabilities, and lifetimes of trauma such as are prevalent among incarcerated youth, they get worse. And they do get out. **They're kids. They do get out, and they're angry. They're not better. They're worse. It doesn't work.**

**#2: There are other options.** We don't have to be doing this. There are alternative approaches available. **Detention should be viewed as a legal status, not a building.** Youth should be assigned according to the risks they pose, rather than assigned to secure detention because there are no other options available. But that is in fact what is happening in our state. Judges are typically faced with only two choices for a young person standing at the bench: either lock him up or send him home. We can provide better options.

**Louisiana is spending \$89 million of precious state general funds on incarcerating juvenile offenders. That's more state money than we're spending on education.** It's more than we're spending on mental health services. It's more than we're spending on addictive disorders. **And more than 70% of the kids in the juvenile prisons are there for non-violent offenses.** The most common offense is burglary. If we divert this money to education, treatment, and rehabilitation, our outcomes will be better. So will our kids. It just makes sense.

Detention should be viewed as a legal status, not a building. Other options include community-based reporting centers, day treatment, electronic monitoring, in-home mental health services, mentoring and tutoring, substance abuse treatment, tracking, residential alternatives, and more – at less cost and more gain.

Years of effort toward moving Louisiana from a reliance on incarceration toward effective responses to juvenile offenses began to bear fruit in 2003. Thanks to the leadership of dedicated state legislators – especially Senator Donald Cravins and Representative Mitch Landrieu, as well as the “Coalition for Effective Juvenile Justice Reform”, for which Agenda for Children served as a co-chair, a bill was passed to begin the process.

Act 1225, the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003, mandates the closure of the Tallulah Youth Prison to juveniles by no later than December 31, 2004, with an additional five months leeway in the case of a “public safety emergency”. The Act also requires that a placement review process be developed to assure that each youth is placed in the least restrictive setting appropriate to his or her need and the public safety.

A Juvenile Justice Implementation Committee, assisted and advised by a JJ Planning and Coordination Board of stakeholders, including Agenda for Children, is responsible for creating a state entity, presumably other than the Department of Corrections, with a more appropriate mission for juvenile justice. A plan for coordinating the delivery of services for all children, youth, and families across the state is also required, as well as a fund to hold and allocate the monies saved from reducing the use of juvenile prisons.

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## **Our mission means that we must act intentionally in ways that combat racism and other forms of oppression.**

Each year when we produce the **Kids Count Data Book on Louisiana’s Children** we are confronted with the specific evidence of the impact of institutional racism on our children and families. Child poverty rates, for example, show that 47% of Louisiana’s African American children live in poverty, compared to 12% of white children. Armed with the history, the principles, and the analysis developed by the New Orleans-based People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, which conducts Undoing Racism training all over the nation, we strive to consistently keep the issue of racism on the agenda in everything we do. It is our belief that **the undoing of the legacy of institutional racism in our state, the nation and the world will lead directly to the accomplishment of our mission.**

